

No Coats Required

I have always been drawn to the sea. It's the sound of the surf; the feel of the waves. So it is that far away from the Chippewa in a land that is warm, I traded in my boots and jeans for a pair of shorts and sandals. I did not even bring my heavy winter coat. I gambled on a successful trip, and left it in my car down in the Cities.

On a jet that flew at an altitude of 39,000 feet, the onboard flight tracker informed me the outdoor air temperature was -79 degrees F. Ever since I spent many hours one day circling overhead a Forest Service prescribed fire with a video camera pressed to one eye, I live in fear of turbulence. The more the fire heated up, the worse it got, and I thought it had wrecked me for flying forever. Happily, however a heavy dose of Dramamine not only kept this poor flier from experiencing any nausea, but from feeling any worries whatsoever.

Our destination was Oahu, one of the Hawaiian islands. Oahu shares the same latitude as Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, and is more than 4000 miles away from my home. This island is 44 miles long and 30 miles wide. On days that I work in Cass Lake, I drive more than 50 miles from Talmoon and never leave the Chippewa National Forest.

A land of many contrasts, we stayed on what is known as the leeward coast. It is winter there, as it is for us, but although there is snow on some mountains in Hawaii, it was generally 70 -80 degrees where we were. The winds were blowing hard when we arrived; bringing ocean air that drops its moisture at the higher elevations. The open, somewhat scraggy leeward coast was mostly dry, but a short drive would soon put you into the mountains where it would rain and rain, and the tropical forests are lush. It was good to hear liquid water in the midst of our winter.

It's a short drive anywhere on the island, although it may take you considerable time to get there. That is because there is frequently incredible traffic. There are a couple of interstate highways, in places 10 – 12 lanes wide, and sometimes traffic is not moving. I guess that's what happens in paradise. Many people want to live or visit there.

We got quite a show from our ocean-side rental house. When the winds were right, I think we could see a jet go by about every 90 seconds, day or night. The big ships were even more interesting as they came by on their way to the Honolulu harbor. I have no idea what all the kinds of vessels were, but I took plenty of pictures in case I ever meet someone who can identify what their purposes, and their likely cargo. That long trip to the mainland for almost all resources no doubt explains the high prices in the grocery stores and at the gas pumps.

The winds helped generate winter waves that Hawaiians and visitors alike love to play in. Did you know that surfing is a Hawaiian creation? In pre-Colonial times, Hawaiian royalty used boards up to 16 feet long, and the commoners had short boards about 6 feet long. My mother and I watched the surfers on the Banzai Pipeline, which is said to generate waves that tower 30 feet. Wind surfers were fun to see off of Diamond Head, a cone and crater formed after most of Oahu's volcanic activity had stopped. The summit is 760 ft high. We passed on the opportunity to walk to the top on a trail that was originally built in 1910 to service the military observation

stations located along the crater rim. Hawaii is said to be the most militarized state in the U.S., with nearly 25% of the land on Oahu controlled by the armed forces.

Tourism drives the economy, with over 7 million visitors annually to the islands. With people, come changes – just as anywhere, but perhaps worse on an island. While there, my mother and I toured a few botanical gardens. They feature trees from near and far, with species like Eucalyptus, bamboo, and palms. We learned that its position 2500 miles from the nearest continental land mass has resulted in Hawaii having one of the world's most isolated and fragile ecosystems. Ninety percent of the native flora is endemic, meaning it is found only in Hawaii. There are more endangered plants per square mile in Hawaii than anywhere else on earth. More than a third of all native Hawaiian forest birds have become extinct, and half of its native flora and fauna is either threatened or endangered. Large amounts of the native forests have been cleared to allow cropping of sugarcane and pineapple, and mass tourism in recent decades has caused an explosion in golf courses. There are now over 40 golf courses on Oahu. Maybe there is more money to be made off of recreating tourists than growing pineapples.

Invasive species are another big ecological problem. While we were there I read a newspaper article detailing the concern for brown tree snakes coming from Guam. It reported on a plan to drop dead fetal mice laced with acetaminophen and equipped with what are referred to as tiny “flotation devices” (I can't help but picture tiny parachutes) so that they hang up in the trees where the snakes will feed upon them. The snakes have no tolerance for acetaminophen. The hope is to substantially reduce the population of these non-native snakes on Guam, to reduce the chance they will spread to Hawaii by way of a ship's hold. The snakes have already wiped out 9 of 12 forest bird species on Guam.

On the last day we were there, I took a cup of coffee and headed to the beach to watch the sun rise over Diamond Head. As I stepped over the sea wall I was surprised to see a dead seal washed up on the beach. Not ever having encountered a seal up close and personal, I grabbed my camera for a couple of pictures. I wondered who I should call about carcass removal. I can't exactly explain why, but somehow it occurred to me that I should poke the seal, wondering what it would feel like. I got pretty close, but just as I was reaching towards it, well, now comes the embarrassing part. That was when the seal informed me that it was not dead, and also, that it did not like me getting so close! There was a bark, and teeth, and I took the point.

Since then, I have learned that the seal I met was a Hawaiian Monk seal. An endangered species, there are not a lot of this kind of seal left in the world. You are not supposed to go near or harass a monk seal in any way. As it turns out there is a rule of thumb. Literally. If you encounter one of these seals on the beach you are supposed to hold out your thumb, turn it sideways, and walk backwards until you cannot see the seal behind your thumb. There is an interesting reason for this. Monk seals haul out onto the beach to have their young. The female monk seal, weighing in at about 400 - 600 pounds, comes onto land by herself and gives birth to a single pup. She stays with it for a solid 6 weeks, not returning to the water even to feed, nursing her baby as it grows. At the end of this time, she goes back to the sea, and pup is left there all lonesome and looking for company. It might lie down next to a log, or a sea turtle. Or, if there are people nearby, it may learn not to be afraid of humans. This can be a problem later, when the pup grows into a big seal, and it sees a swimmer in the water. Perhaps wanting to play, it may pull that swimmer

under the water, or even bite them. It is for the seal's own good that you should learn the rule of thumb, because if that seal becomes a problem later, it will be dealt with.

Once I learned this seal was alive and somewhat crabby, I backed off. We spent a couple hours watching it from a respectful distance, and it looked to me to be pretty comfortable as it napped in the sun. Every now and then it would roll over, or scratch its face with a flipper, in a manner that was very reminiscent of a dog rubbing its muzzle with a paw.

The seal I met had a mark, labeling it as "N3". Not being an expert on seals, I do not know if that is N as in Nate, or N as in Nadine, but I am hopeful that I will hear a little more about N3 from NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration). That is who you are supposed to report monk seal sightings to. I sent them an e-mail of my encounter (yes, I admitted it all), and I asked if they could tell me what they know about N3, and also, just how many monk seals they know of right now. I am hoping they do not respond with something like, "we deal with your kind all the time, and it would be your own darn fault if you got bit by one of the rarest marine mammals in the world!" or some such. What can I say? I'm not from around there.

You have to wonder what chance these seals have in a world that is becoming so small. An article in the Honolulu newspaper spoke of broken boats and refrigerators from the 2011 Japan tsunami now washing up on Hawaiian shores. One of the concerns is for what kind of invasive species might be attached to this debris floating in the ocean from 4000 miles away. I know nothing of such things, but catch myself pondering whether there could be any radiation from the nuclear reactor on this debris.



You might be wondering how I could possibly link this trip to Hawaii with writing about the Chippewa. For me, the connection is clear. They aren't making any more land. The ecological issues that are happening on the islands are also happening here. It just hasn't become as intense yet, because we have a bigger land base. My advice to us all is to take note. Treasure your public lands. Don't take them for granted. Do what you can to support them. Do your part to slow down the movement of invasive species.

Don't abuse your precious resources. The world is a changing place. If you think about all the changes that have happened on the Chippewa since it became a National Forest in 1908, 105 years ago, what do you think will occur in the next hundred years?

I have always been drawn to the sea, but I have a deep, abiding love for the north woods. So I was not sad to return home to the Chippewa. As I drove the last leg of my trip back home, that favorite part that runs up over Winnie Dam and through Inger way, I was glad to greet the pines under their heavy blanket of snow. I think I counted a grand total of 3 vehicles on my way across, so the traffic snarls were not too bad. The ice dams on my old house are growing almost as quickly as the snow banks. It won't be quite the same as a sunrise over Diamond Head, but we can watch the Minnesota sunset as we grill on the deck, our oasis in a mountain of snow.

Home just in time to say *Aloha*, that confusing Hawaiian greeting that means both hello and goodbye, to my mother-in-law. Somehow it seems fitting for when you must let go of that you would rather hold onto. *Mahalo*, Bev. Thank you. We will see you on the other side.

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